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Missing the mark on juvenile detention

Despite a report to the contrary, Multnomah County's system works well and has key participants' support

Critics of the criminal justice system like to see the bad guys in jail.

This may be part of the reason a report on the juvenile justice system in Multnomah County by Crime Victims United, an anti-crime group, has generated more heat than light in the past couple of weeks.

The report, which CVU released May 27, criticizes the county's juvenile justice system for failing to detain more young criminals.

Since 1995, the county's policy has, indeed, been that juvenile detention is more preventative than punitive. In most cases, the county seeks alternatives to detention.

But this is not, as the crime victims group suggests, a case of social workers taking over an ill-supervised department of the county. The approach grew out of a citizens' study and is supported and supervised by leaders among police, prosecutors, the defense bar and judges.

The evidence suggests that alternatives to juvenile detention work better in the long run. An Oregon study, for example, found that group detention can lead to worse results because juvenile offenders learn criminal behavior from one another. In Multnomah County, two-thirds of first-time offenders have not committed new crimes. That compares favorably with other Oregon counties.

Finding ways to keep young people from sliding into the criminal life is important, points out Nan Waller, the Multnomah County circuit judge who supervises juvenile courts, because by definition, most offenders are released sooner or later.

The CVU report has errors and, we believe, misinterpretations of data. But it does offer some useful advice.

First, the victims organization suggests a top-to-bottom review of the juvenile system. It has been subject to continuing scrutiny, of course, and a new assessment from the Annie E. Casey Foundation -- the source of many of the ideas being employed here -- is due out soon. But the idea of an overall, arms-length assessment conducted locally shouldn't be dismissed.

Second, the CVU study found real disaffection among police officers and juvenile counselors. The system's leaders seem too willing to see this as a matter of poor communication to those in the trenches. But maybe it's also a matter of poor listening at the top. The overwhelming negativity among front-line workers pointed to in the study should be analyzed and addressed quickly.

And finally, the county's juvenile justice system needs to be more transparent. The crime group's report complains that the county's approach is just "permissiveness with a good marketing plan." But it's not permissiveness if the approach actually works.

And it's not much of a marketing plan if hardly anybody knows that it does.